

# Wasson's Literary Precursors

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There can be no doubt that the modern era of ethnomycology begins with the work of Gordon and Valentina Wasson. The late Mr. Wasson is the Abraham of the reborn awareness in Western civilization of the presence of the shamanically empowering mushroom. Yet, like all great innovative thinkers, the Wassons had their precursors. Before the Wassons there were those who had stumbled onto an awareness of the visionary potential of fungi. Their experiences, their findings, did not become a *cause célèbre* or an academic discipline. Many simply chose to keep secret what they had discovered — a sensible response to Western society's longstanding bias against these mushrooms, which was reinforced by frightening reports of "mushroom intoxication" that never acknowledged anything salutary about the experience. A good example, set down in *Science*, September 18, 1914, is by A. E. Merrill of Yale University. Merrill described the hallucinogenic effects of an accidental ingestion of *Panaeolus papilionaceus* from Oxford County, Maine. Although the identification of the mushroom may have been in error, the effects described are very likely due to psilocybin. Robert Graves has offered a summary of the incident in his *Food for Centaurs*:

Mr. W. gathered about a pound of *Panaeolus papilionaceus* mushrooms and fried them in butter for himself and his niece. The immediate effect was that both felt a bit tipsy, and soon their surroundings seemed to take on bright colors, in which a vivid green predominated. Next both experienced an irresistible impulse to run and jump, which they did hilariously, laughing almost to the point of hysteria at the witty remarks they exchanged... When they left the house to take a walk, they lost all sense of time — a long period seemed short and contrariwise; the same with distances... Wallpaper patterns appeared to creep and crawl about, though at first remaining two-dimensional; then began to grow out toward him from the walls with uncanny motions. He looked at a bunch of large red roses, all of one kind, which lay on the table; and at another on a

writing-desk. At once the room seemed to fill with roses of various red colors and many sizes in lavish bunches, wreaths and chains.

Feeling a sudden rush of blood to his head, he lay down. Then followed an illusion of countless hideous faces of every sort and extending in multitudes over endless distances, all grimacing at him rapidly and horribly, and colored like fireworks — intense reds, purples, greens and yellows.

It would be difficult indeed for any voluntary user of hallucinogenic fungi to openly defend such effects as desirable, even for artistic inspiration. Instead, the inclination was for the mushroom cognoscenti to keep silent. Yet some, it appears, found a way to safely publicize their personal familiarity with psychoactive mushrooms, by disguising it as literary fiction. It is useful for us now, in the expanded intellectual arena that ethnomycology has created for itself, to examine those brave futurists of the past who anticipated what Gordon Wasson made explicit — that is, the presence of an awesome spiritual power resident in the visionary fungi, resident in psilocybin.

The Wassons acknowledged a few of these “literary precursors” in *Mushrooms, Russia and History*. One was Lewis Carroll, whose 1865 masterpiece *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* includes an interesting section in which Alice eats pieces of a mushroom that causes her to alternately shrink and grow. The Wassons observed:

All of Alice’s subsequent distortions, softened by the loving irony of Lewis Carroll’s imagination, retain the flavor of mushroomic hallucinations. Is there not something uncanny about the injection of this mushroom into Alice’s story? What led the quiet Oxford don to hit on a device so felicitous, but at the same time sinister for the initiated readers, when he launched his maiden on her way? Did he dredge up this curious specimen of wondrous and even fearsome lore from some deep well of half-conscious folk knowledge?

The possibility that Carroll may have drawn on a personal experience with psychoactive mushrooms is not acknowledged by the Wassons. Instead they proceed to develop convincingly their thesis that he got his inspiration from a different source: Mordecai Cooke’s *Plain and Easy Account of British Fungi* (1862). This book included what the Wassons call “horrifying accounts of the amanita-eating Korjaks” of Siberia, who, upon eating this mushroom (*Amanita muscaria*), experienced “erroneous impressions of size and distance” among other psychoactive effects.

Interestingly, the Wassons ignored a significant piece of evidence that strengthens the case for their thesis considerably. It is found in the beginning of the scene in which Alice encounters the magical mushroom:

There was a large mushroom growing near her, about the same height as herself; and, when she had looked under it, and on both sides of it and behind it, it occurred to her that she might as well look and see what was on the top of it.

She stretched herself up on tiptoe and peeped over the edge of the mushroom, and her eyes immediately met those of a large blue caterpillar that was sitting on the top with its arms folded, quietly smoking a long hookah and taking not the smallest notice of her or of anything else.

At the time the Wassons wrote *Mushrooms, Russia and History* they did not know of another, more relevant book by Mordecai Cooke, *The Seven Sisters of Sleep* (1860), which discussed seven major varieties of psychoactive substances. Included among them are both *Amanita muscaria* and cannabis, united by Carroll in one striking image of a hookah-smoking caterpillar perched on a mushroom with magical properties.

Also in *Mushrooms, Russia and History*, the Wassons acknowledged an interesting psychoactive mushroom story written by H. G. Wells in the late 19th century. “The Purple Pileus” tells the ostensibly fictional tale of one Mr. Coombes, a meek, henpecked man who tries to kill himself by eating what he thinks to be a poisonous mushroom he finds in the forest. This mushroom, writes Wells, is “a peculiarly poisonous-looking purple: slimy, shiny and emitting a sour odor.” When broken by Coombes, its creamy white inner flesh changes “like magic in the space of ten seconds to a yellowish-green color.” Its taste is so pungent he almost spits it out. Within minutes, his pulse starts to race and he feels a tingling sensation in his fingertips and toes. Then, before he can pick more purple pilei from a cluster he sees in the distance, Coombes is distracted by the mushroom’s full effect. It induces a powerful change in his psychology for several hours, transforming him into a veritable lion. He rushes home, gaily singing and dancing, to confront his wife. His eyes as he enters the house are described as “unnaturally large and bright.” After frightening off his wife’s boyfriend and earning her lasting respect, he falls into a “deep and healing sleep.”

The Wassons make it clear, in their analysis of Wells’ story, that Coombes had not eaten *Amanita muscaria*. Instead, they conclude, Wells had “filled out the necessities of a given plot by inventing the needed mushroom.” They do not suggest, and apparently never considered, that Wells’ purple pileus may have been a thinly disguised *Psilocybe* mushroom. Like *Psilocybe*, it changes color when broken; has a markedly pungent taste when eaten fresh; often grows in clusters; quickly causes profound psychological and somatic effects, including dilation of the pupils; and induces deep sleep as an aftereffect. Also worth noting is that Wasson later, in 1978, made much of a psychoactive fungus’ purple color in *The Road to Eleusis: Unveiling the Secret of the Mysteries*, where he and coauthors Albert Hofmann and Carl A. P. Ruck argued convincingly that the sacramental drink imbibed at Eleusis contained the psychoactive fungus *Claviceps purpurea*. According to them, the purple color of the vestments of the priests who conducted the mysteries was identical to, and therefore emblematic of, this fungus, which grows throughout Europe.

Could Wells have been personally familiar with the effects of *Psilocybe*, *Claviceps*, or some other species of hallucinogenic mushroom? Certain others of his stories seem to resonate with insights that may well have been derived from

such experience. In “The Plattner Story,” for example, the title character finds himself transported to an eerie, hallucinatory “Other-world” with a green sun, where the left and right side of his body are transposed. The green illumination is consistent with the previously cited experience of Graves’ Mr. W., whose “surroundings seemed to take on bright colors, in which a vivid green predominated” when he ate what were reported to be *Panaeolus papilionaceus* mushrooms. The transposition of Plattner’s body reminds one of Alice’s adventures “through the looking glass,” since mirrors cause a similar transposition; modern theories are that hallucinogens shift emphasis from left- to right- brain thinking. Of equal interest, this “Other-world” coexists with ours and is accessible to us when our perceptions are enhanced. “It seems quite possible,” wrote Wells, “that people with unusually keen eyesight may occasionally catch a glimpse of this strange Other-world about us.” Another Wells story, “The New Accelerator,” tells of a man who takes a drug that speeds his metabolism to such a degree that the world around him appears to be standing still. The impression of “stopping the world” is another effect that occurs with hallucinogens, though Wells compares it instead to the effect of nitrous oxide: “You know that blank nonexistence into which one drops when one has taken “gas,”” says his protagonist. “For an indefinite interval it was like that.” The possibility that Wells experienced psychoactive substances is therefore compelling.

An even stronger case can be made for Wells’ contemporary John Uri Lloyd, who almost certainly had personal awareness of the psychoactivity of psilocybin-containing mushrooms. The first publication date of his crypto-discourse on psilocybin, *Etidorhpa*, is 1895, nearly 60 years before the Wassons’ first trip to Huautla. There is ample evidence, both circumstantial and *prima facie*, that Lloyd had experienced intoxication by psilocybin. Lloyd was a *fin de siècle* character, both a competent pharmaceutical chemist and a man with a passion for occult literature and speculation. According to Neal Wilgus, author of the introduction to both later editions of *Etidorhpa*, Lloyd was born in West Bloomfield, New York, on April 19, 1849 — the eldest son of a civil engineer and a descendant of Governor John Webster of Massachusetts. His family moved to Kentucky and then to Cincinnati. It was there, at the age of 15, that John Uri Lloyd began to learn the drug trade. He became the laboratory manager of a drug firm and later became a partner in the company. Lloyd and his brothers published a quarterly journal, *Drugs and Medicines of North America*. Later he was to participate in the establishment of the Lloyd Library of Botany and Pharmacy. To this day, in the field of phytochemistry, the preeminence of the journal *Lloydia* is a testament to the Lloyd brothers’ passion for pharmacology and pharmacognosy.

John Uri’s brother, Curtis Gates Lloyd, is described by one source as one of the leading fungi botanists of his time. C. G. Lloyd made extensive collections of fungi in the Gulf states and the Deep South; there can be little doubt that if a mushroom species such as *Stropharia cubensis* was present then in those places with even a fraction of the frequency that it is encountered today, then Curtis Gates Lloyd would have collected and been familiar with it. Lloyd’s specimen collections deposited with the Smithsonian number several thousands. Perhaps

an examination of those collections would yield specimens of psychoactive fungi and field notes concerning them.

In any case, it seems clear that John Uri Lloyd's bizarre hollow earth novel *Etidorhpa* was for him a kind of labyrinth at whose center he wished to place the apotheosis that he had personally experienced in his own peregrinations in the realm of gigantic fungi. For 41 pages (from page 235 to page 276 in the 1895 privately printed author's edition), Lloyd raves. He gives us not only his encounter with the anagrammatic mother goddess Etidorhpa (she is "Aphrodite" backward), but a theory of time that bears the unmistakable imprint of the mushroom *philosophe*. At the end of seven chapters devoted to a classic psychopompic initiation via visionary fungi, Lloyd places a footnote that lets the cat out of the bag:

If, in the course of experimentation, a chemist should strike upon a compound that in traces only would subject his mind and drive his pen to record such seemingly extravagant ideas as are found in the hallucinations herein pictured, or to frame word-sentences foreign to normal conditions and beyond his natural ability, and yet could he not know the end of such a drug, would it not be his duty to bury the discovery from others, to cover from mankind the existence of such a noxious fruit of the chemist's or pharmacist's art? To sip once or twice of such a potent liquid and then to write lines that tell the story of its power may do no harm to an individual on his guard, but mankind in common should never possess such a penetrating essence. Introduce such an intoxicant and start it to ferment in humanity's blood and it may spread from soul to soul, until, before the world is advised of its possible results, the ever increasing potency will gain such headway as to destroy or debase our civilization, and even to exterminate mankind.

And what are the extravagant ideas and hallucinations of which John Uri Lloyd wishes to speak? At the close of chapter 23, the hero of *Etidorhpa* is told to drink the juice of "a peculiar fungus." Our hero's guide minces no words: "He spoke the single word, "Drink," and I did as directed." The following three chapters are a virtual monologue on the methods of intoxication known to humanity worldwide and throughout history. The horror of inebriation and addiction is graphically depicted and reaches a climax in chapter 39, "Among the Drunkards." If these chapters are the obligatory hell experience of 19th century drug reportage, then chapter 40 is the paradisiacal apotheosis. It is also the climax of the book and contains the incident in which the hero confronts Etidorhpa. Indeed, J. Augustus Knapp's beautiful etching of her is tipped into this chapter. Her appearance and retinue sets off a cascade of florid (and psychedelic) Victorian prose:

Could any man from the data of my past experiences have predicted such a scene? Never before had the semblance of a woman appeared, never before had an intimation been given that the gentle sex existed in these silent chambers. Now, from the grotesque figures and

horrible cries of the former occupants of this same cavern, the scene had changed to a conception of the beautiful and artistic, such as a poetic spirit might evolve in an extravagant dream of higher fairy land. I glanced above; the great hall was clothed in brilliant colors, the bare rocks had disappeared, the dome of that vast arch, reaching to an immeasurable height, was decorated in all the colors of the rainbow. Flags and streamers fluttered in breezes that also moved the garments of the angelic throng about me, but which I could not sense.

The band of spirits or fairy forms reached the rock at my feet, but I did not know how long a time they consumed in doing this; it may have been a second, and it may have been an eternity. Neither did I care. A single moment of existence such as I experienced seemed worth an age of any other pleasure.

The appearance of the goddess is quickly followed by reestablishment of the theme of suffering and terror as the hero imagines himself lost and wandering for days in an arid wasteland, at first tormented by the sun, later frozen by its absence. As this hallucination fades:

The ice scene dissolved, the enveloped frozen form of myself faded from view, the sand shrunk into nothingness, and with my natural body and in normal condition, I found myself back in the earth cavern, on my knees beside the curious inverted fungus, of which fruit I had eaten in obedience to my guide's directions.

At the beginning of chapter 42 the hero argues with his guide concerning the nature of what he has just experienced. The psychopomp speaks first:

"You ate of the narcotic fungus; you have been intoxicated."

"I have not," I retorted. "I have been through your accursed caverns and into hell beyond. I have been consumed by eternal damnation in the journey, have experienced a heaven of delight and also an eternity of misery."

"Upon the contrary, the time that has passed since you drank the liquid contents of that fungus fruit has only been that which permitted you to fall upon your knees. You swallowed the liquor when I handed you the shell cup; you dropped upon your knees and then instantly awoke. See," he said, "in corroboration of my assertion the shell of the fungus fruit at your feet is still dripping with the liquid you did not drink. Time has been annihilated. Under the influence of this potent earth-bread narcoto-intoxicant, your dream began inside of eternity; you did not pass into it."

These passages are more than sufficient to convince the open-minded reader that John Uri Lloyd, 19th century savant, pharmacist, occultist and author, had discovered the consciousness-expanding properties of psilocybin mushrooms, experienced them and then decided to suppress his discovery. Given Lloyd's obvious

ambiguity toward the visionary state, evinced by his diatribes against intoxication, and his love of word play, evinced by his reversing the letters in the name Aphrodite to create the title of his masterpiece, I am emboldened to put forth evidence that argues that Lloyd had a particular species of mushroom in mind, one that must have been very familiar to his botanist brother Curtis.

Facing page 116 in the author's 1895 edition is a magnificent full-page illustration of the hero and his guide making their way through a forest of enormous mushrooms. The caption reads "I was in a forest of colossal fungi." While examining this illustration and thinking about the letter reversal used to form the book's title, it occurred to me that perhaps the clue to the identity of the intoxicant that Lloyd was so concerned to suppress might be hidden anagrammatically in the captions of the full-page illustrations. "If such were the case," came the unbidden thought, "then the following full-page illustration may have a caption that can be manipulated to give the name of the secret source of the intoxicant."

That illustration (opposite page 130) again shows hero and guide, this time examining the face of a stony cliff of a crystalline mineral. The caption reads, "Monstrous Cubical Crystals." Anagrammatic manipulation is unnecessary. Out of the caption the letter groups *STRO CUB* jump out at anyone with any interest in ethnomycology. *Stropharia cubensis* is the species most likely to have been known to the botanical Lloyds!

Does this mean that the mystery has been solved? That all the pieces neatly fall into place? Quite the contrary. *Stropharia cubensis* was supposedly not named until its discovery in Cuba by the botanist Earle in 1906, nine years after the first publication of *Etidorhpa*! Are we dealing with an instance of prophetic vision, or an outlandishly improbable coincidence? Or would research show that the Lloyd brothers knew the work of Earle, knew even the name he would eventually propose for a new species of mushroom flourishing in the pastures of the American South and the Caribbean Islands? It is the kind of mystery that haunts research into the world of mycolatry, the kind of mystery that Gordon Wasson loved.

Wasson's interest in Lloyd is a matter of record, though he never, to my knowledge, wrote about him in his books. There is a file at the Valentina and Gordon Wasson Ethnomycological Collection at Harvard's Botanical Museum where Wasson saved newspaper clippings, letters, notes and other information for a second edition of *Mushrooms, Russia and History* that never materialized. In this file is a letter from a Mr. Bernard Lentz dated May 16, 1957, recommending that Wasson read *Etidorhpa*. A copy of Wasson's reply, dated June 4, 1957, is also on file. It reads in part: "I shall try to look the matter up when I have time. John Uri Lloyd — a well known name." Years later, in his forward to a bookseller's catalog, Wasson wrote the following:

There is one item in it [the catalog] that interests me especially: *Etidorhpa* ("Aphrodite" spelled backwards), by J. U. Lloyd, a strange novel, or better a fantasy, first published in 1895, a novel that Michael Horowitz (the cataloguer) rightly says was a psychoactive

mushroom tale. Where did Lloyd's ideas come from? He must have read carefully Captain John G. Bourke's *Scatologic Rites of All Nations*, published in 1891, that immense and amazing collection of scatological materials. Lloyd's mushrooms are clearly not *Amanita muscaria*. Did he possess a copy of that rarest of all entheogenic books, by the famous English mycologist M. C. Cooke, *The Seven Sisters of Sleep*, a book that Cooke never referred to in his later mycological writings? Here is indeed a manual of psychoactive drugs, published almost 120 years ago! Nor was it included in the bibliography of his writings published on his death. How did Lloyd hit on this mushroom fantasy? Is there latent in our society a memory of mushroom use, long, long ago, a subliminal memory that crops out in Lloyd's tale, also in *Alice in Wonderland*? The suggestive shapes and delicate changing colors of mushrooms, their sudden appearance and disappearance, the endless diversity in their odors, one for each species — all support a mushroom mythology that is backed up, when one knows about it, by the compelling entheogenic potency residing in some of them.

Again, as with Carroll and Wells, Wasson failed to admit the possibility that Lloyd's insights were based on personal experience; but neither did he rule it out. The matter thus remains to be resolved by a new generation of ethnomycologists — or literary archeologists.

Finally, we turn to a work of the 20th century overlooked by Wasson. In the May 1915 issue of the *Irish Ecclesiastical Record* a piece appeared, written by an A. Newman, titled "Monsieur Among the Mushrooms." This piece purports to be a nonfiction recollection of a person known to the author. "Monsieur Among the Mushrooms" was reprinted in 1917, one piece among many, in a book titled *Unknown Immortals in the Northern City of Success* by one Herbert Moore Pim, apparently a minor essayist and journalist of the time. Pim in his preface thanks the editors of the *Irish Ecclesiastical Record* for permission to reprint "Monsieur," so we can be confident that Pim is A. Newman.

While the mushrooms described in "Monsieur" are not overtly psychoactive (except, perhaps, as a fetish), the story is relevant to our discussion for being 1) the record of a person with an appreciation of mushrooms on a cosmic scale and 2) the earliest known instance of a modern cult of mushroom users. Pim says in his preface:

The original of "Monsieur Among the Mushrooms" is alive and prosperous. He is a perfectly amazing person, a man of considerable fortune, who has, I believe, been detained in an asylum on several occasions. He conducts a large business during the daytime; but he may be discovered at four or five o'clock in the morning, pouring forth a stream of brilliance and holding men in the cold street against their will. His brain works with such rapidity that he has constructed a language of his own, by means of which only the absolutely essential thought is presented to the hearer. I have seen calm

men whipped into fury when they found themselves simply swept off their feet in argument with my model.

In “Monsieur” I have drawn him exactly as he exists, save in the matter of the physical description. Apart from that fact, there is nothing exaggerated; and the debate between Monsieur and the members of the committee is almost as true as a description of such a debate could be. There you see my model and his method.

“Monsieur Among the Mushrooms” is a recollection of a remarkable personality, we might say an obsessed personality, who has been committed to an asylum because of his unusual ideas concerning fungi. In the piece, Monsieur argues that he is sane before the release committee of the asylum in which he resides; but before that Pim informs us of the remarkable philosophy and history of his model, as he calls him:

Here it was that Monsieur learned how the mushroom might be persuaded to grow; and here it was that for many days he toiled unobserved, appropriately attired in black, with a light heart and a somewhat lightened purse. And in those first, fresh, active days he found time even to press his theory upon others as a physic to be received in small measures, while the giver retains something, if it even be the bottle. And so it came that, in a little while, there arose a respectful company of believers.

“How great, indeed,” Monsieur would exclaim, “is the mushroom! It has claimed the round world for its habitation; and when man rears his cities of stone it demands of him that even in the heart of cities it shall be given space to express itself in silence.”

There was the world itself to be considered. For presently it put its claw into its own stomach, where Monsieur and his disciples were digesting wisdom, and demanded to know the reason for an aesthetic appreciation of a commodity interesting only for its commercial value.

Needless to say, a hearing was held, its conclusions forgone:

And who can forget the genial and superior smile which rested upon the faces of his judges? The mushroom was the all-powerful exception! Just so. Who could doubt it? But for such as believed in it there had been made complete provision.

“But how,” exclaimed Monsieur, “shall I make progress in my investigation?”

He was assured with gentleness that, even though placed *extra muros*, he should have “every facility,” “ample scope,” and that, above all, he might hope to be well again.

“But to what end?” he interrupted.

“In order,” it was explained to him, “that you may be in harmony with the majority.”

“But the majority here are mushrooms! Man, their toy, is nowhere. It is he who is *extra muros!*”

A virtual prisoner, Monsieur spends his days in the asylum contemplating the irony of his situation and ultimately hatches a plan of escape. His asylum musings revolve around only one theme:

With his knowledge of the mushroom he was all-powerful. Behind the material which witnessed to a supremely strong exception, there was the energy of mind that drove and guided, swept aside and conquered. And in the mushroom itself there was unity without contact. The mushroom was, indeed, a giant body torn and strewn over the earth. There was the fungus of the hair. There was that which, by its shape, clearly proved the existence of the brain. There was a form which made certain that the egg was the origin of that which it contained. There was the manifestation of that which generates. And there was a growth which appertained to the lower animals. There were many things besides: the star-like eyes, from which the sun and moon derived their radiance; the great masses of body and limb; the fingers and the features; the mouth that devoured. There was the warrior from whose wounds blood could flow. There was that which indicated the cellular structure of the human body, and indeed of all living things. And yet all this was incalculably strong, and all this was inexplicably united.

Eventually Monsieur effects a daring, mushroom-assisted escape. Then we are told in a footnote:

He lived for some time under the protection of the keeper of a plant nursery, who had become so enthusiastic a believer in the doctrine of the Mushroom that he painted his glass-houses with a black light-excluding fluid and cultivated the mushroom reverently. A primitive worship had already developed when Monsieur was restored to his followers. I have reason to believe that he prepared to encourage this, and in some respects to modify it. But the world interfered. There is a journal before me which records frequent attacks upon the glass-houses; and there are references to search parties from the asylum. I am enabled to trace the purchase of a sailing ship by the keeper of the plant nursery and the embarkation of Monsieur and his followers upon this ship, the hold of which contained mushroom-spore bricks. After that I have no reliable evidence.

Aside from the early date of its composition, what makes “Monsieur Among the Mushrooms” so interesting is that it purports to be a factual account of a group of people, informed as to the transformative power of the mushroom and

united around a leader and a set of cult practices. It is difficult to believe that Pim would have given such a central philosophical role to mushrooms had he not been aware of the visionary experience imparted by psilocybin-containing species.

Perhaps Pim had read *Etidorhpa*. The book was very popular in its time, having influenced no less a personage than Howard Phillips Lovecraft, the inventor of “cosmic horror” science fiction and the Cthulhu mythos. Lovecraft makes reference to *Etidorhpa* in material contained in his *Selected Letters* and *Marginalia*, noting for instance that his visit to the Endless Caverns in Virginia made him think “above all else, of that strange old novel *Etidorhpa* once pass’d around our Kleicomolo circle.”

Ultimately we are left with a number of unanswered questions: who was the mysterious Monsieur and where and how did he discover the psychoactive properties of mushrooms? Was Monsieur actually Herbert Moore Pim himself? Are there other written records concerning this remarkable career? Into what asylum was Monsieur placed? What “journals” did Pim refer to as describing the attacks on the glasshouses of Monsieur’s benefactor? And finally, what became of Monsieur, his writings and his disciples? All fascinating questions, answers to which would serve to illuminate the real status of awareness of psilocybin in the pre-Wasson era.

Finally we come to the notion of those precursors of Wasson who were his peers, for no one’s thought grows in a world devoid of its self-reflections. The most apparent initiatory influence on Gordon Wasson in the matter of mushrooms was certainly his wife, partner and codiscoverer Valentina:

Suddenly, before I knew it, my bride threw down my hand roughly and ran up into the forest with cries of ecstasy. She had seen toadstools growing, many kinds of toadstools. She had not seen the like since Russia, since 1917. She was in a delirium of excitement and began gathering them right and left in her shirt. From the path I called to her, admonished her not to gather them: they were toadstools, I said, they were poisonous. . . I acted the perfect Anglo-Saxon oaf confronting a wood nymph I had never before laid eyes on.

Valentina and Gordon Wasson were influenced in the direction of their mushroom studies by Robert Graves, quoted above. Graves discusses Wasson in a number of essays published together as *Difficult Questions, Easy Answers*. In one of these, “The Two Births of Dionysus,” Graves writes:

Wasson began his career as a journalist without any university education (which may account for the preservation of his genius), became a Wall Street reporter, was taken over by J. P. Morgan & Co. as their press agent and soon elevated to Vice President when his extraordinary understanding of business became apparent. Similarly with his second profession: he began as an amateur mycologist and has since become the acknowledged founder of the huge, immensely important new science, ethnomycology. Whenever I pick up strange

news of mushrooms, as often happens, I send it to him for filing. It had been a chance bit of information that I passed on to him in the early '50s that prompted him to investigate the mushroom oracles of Mexico.

Robert Graves' writings on mushrooms, poetry and mythology deserve a wider audience. His thought runs in a parallel stream to that of Wasson, and each illuminates the other. Graves' *Food for Centaurs* and *Difficult Questions, Easy Answers* are rich with thought and imagery directed toward understanding the psychedelic experience.

Graves' last sentence above is fascinating. "It had been a chance bit of information that I passed on to him in the early '50s that prompted him to investigate the mushroom oracles of Mexico." Graves is casually referring to the pivotal incident in the reemergence of Western civilization's discovery of visionary ecstasy through psilocybin. One can only wonder just where Robert Graves had picked up this "chance bit of information." Quite by coincidence I ran across a passage in an unlikely source that may shed light on this.

In discussing Sufi techniques of word play, Idris Shah in his book *The Sufis* makes the following comments:

The Arabic word for a hallucinogenic fungus is from the root GHRB. Words derived from the GHRB root indicate a knowledge of the strange influence of hallucinogenic fungi.

Shah goes on to quote from the Sufi ecstatic Mast Qalandar. After analyzing the text, Shah concludes:

The usages of these words, though not incorrect, are so unusual (because there is so often a conventional word more apt in such a context) that there is absolutely no doubt that a message is being conveyed to the effect that chemical hallucinogens derived from fungi provide an undeniable but counterfeit experience.

In the world of ethnomycology the news of an Arabic or Sufi mushroom cult, ancient or modern, would be of great interest. Shah denies the possibility that Sufis used mushrooms, but his very denial is the first time I have heard such a thing suggested. The gentleman doth protest too much. Something in this reminded me of a passage in Graves' essay "The Two Births of Dionysus" mentioned above, wherein he explicitly mentions his own awareness of *Stropharia*:

[Wasson] with his Russian wife had made me aware that *Stropharia*, a small [sic] mushroom growing on cow dung, possesses much the same properties, and whispered news comes to me that this was still used for sacred purposes in India where it grew on the dung of sacred cows.

It appears to me that Graves learned about mushrooms from Idris Shah. Indeed the introduction to Shah's book *The Sufis* is written by Graves! At one point

Graves writes, "I wrote to Idris Shah and he replied." In another place he remarks, speaking of an emblem, "Idris Shah Sayed has explained its symbolism to me." Idris Shah Sayed happens to be in the senior male line of descent from the Prophet Mohammed and to have inherited the secret mysteries from the Caliphs, his ancestors. He is, in fact, a Grand Sheikh of the Sufi *Tariqa*.

Here, then, is the place to leave this scholarly reminiscence, having shown earnestly but light-heartedly that our beloved Valentina and Gordon Wasson, when they went to Mexico in search of magic mushrooms, may have been acting on a hint dropped to an Irish poet by a great-grandson of Mohammed. The Wassons thereby gave meaning to the otherwise premature and incomprehensible discoveries of John Uri Lloyd and Herbert Moore Pim. And more than all that: they thereby gave psilocybin to the modern world.